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AUTHOR Myers, David G.
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ABSTRACT

Strategies for writing a text are offered by a college professor on the basis of his own experience of writing a text on social psychology. Suggestions are given on creating an efficient office environment, researching the topic, and drafting the manuscript. One way to improve efficiency is to compress teaching into a few days, leaving the remaining days free. Some textbook publishers will pay the college to free the faculty member to write. Word processing is beneficial when producing many drafts, and the publisher can be provided with a copy-edited product on diskettes. Information for writing the text can be obtained by reading abstracts of articles, selecting relevant articles, and sending for convention papers. Three types of sources are valuable: authoritative literature reviews, content analyses of leading introductory texts, and the reports of expert consultants. Before beginning to write, reading a style manual is useful. Writing for the student is important, and retaining a writing coach to review the writing style and choice of words can help improve the writing. Finally, eliciting detailed comments of an editor and the criticisms of professional colleagues on every chapter is advisable. Some reference is made to writing psychology texts. (SW)

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TEXT WRITING AT AN UNDERGRADUATE COLLEGE

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David G. Myers

Hope College

Holland, Michigan 49423

Because text writing is teaching--the teaching of an unseen student body--those whose daily priority is the teaching of undergraduates may wish to extend their teaching through the printed page. Let's assume that one has secured a publisher. How, then, amid the demands of teaching, advising, and other professional activities, can one find the time and resources to do it? My own strategies--developed while writing a social psychology text and now an introductory text--are nothing more than one writer's means of coping.

Creating an Efficient Office Environment

First, some tidbits on office efficiency. Our college carpenter constructed a large, arched writing desk that supplements my office desk, and a vertical filing system with 96 removable shelves. The latter serves as an organizer for class handouts, reprints, and all the abstracts and papers that accumulate for each chapter topic.

To mask distracting hallway noises, I sometimes turn on a soothing white noise maker--an inexpensive Sears, Roebuck "Sleepmate." To further improve efficiency, I compress my teaching--even when teaching a twelve hour load--into Tuesdays and Thursdays, leaving the remaining days largely free for other activity. (The publisher of the introductory text, Worth Publishers, is currently paying my institution to free me from teaching while I write.)

Unlike those who claim that word processing speeds their drafting of material, my experience is that words come equally fast (actually, equally slow) whether the keyboard is connected to a typewriter or a computer screen. The significant benefit of word processing is in the production of draft after draft--without pangs of conscience as I approach my secretary and without fear that new errors will lurk. We have also provided the publisher with copy edited, virtually error-free diskettes, keyed with special codes that dictate type size. This enabled a considerable savings in composition costs and it enabled me to

have the last word on the copy editing.

Researching One's Topics

I began my homework for Social Psychology by reading the abstracts of articles published in a dozen leading journals during the preceeding three years. Those judged poten ially useful were then filed (as are the potentially useful abstracts from the ten social psychology periodicals to which I now subscribe). Judgments of potential usefulness are not only judgments of scientific importance, but also of interest value (does the research vividly illustrate an important principle?) and of whether the book's organizational structure provides a home for the research. Experience has taught me that it is inefficient to read articles thoroughly before filing their abstracts, because they must be read again when it comes time to write on the topic. Reading the primary sources is essential, both to minimize the errors that plague so many books (I have occasionally traced idiosyncratic referencing errors from one textbook to another) and, more important, to be able to describe the research vividly--to paint a "you are there" word picture of what it was like to experience the experiment.

I gather other information by sending for convention papers. (After the 1983 APA convention I sent for 210 papers and received 126 replies.) And I write leading investigators--both to solicit their latest work, including articles in press, and to invite their corrections of my descriptions of their research. To such letters I nearly always receive gracious and helpful replies. Obviously, all this necessitates a trremendous amount of reading. The image of the writer hunched over a keyboard is less apt than the image of one buried in stacks of paper. But part of the joy of writing is that seldom is there a day when I do not learn something new, or when I do not feel admiration for the genius of one of my professional colleagues.

Since I have neither the time nor competence to scan all the primary literature relevant to an introductory psycholcgy text, I am influenced by three types of sources: 1) authoritative literature reviews, 2) my own detailed content analyses of leading introductory psychology texts (which, taken together, reflect whatever consensus has existed), and 3) the reports of expert consultants whose suggestions my editor solicits on my behalf. Many of these consultant reports have called our attention to important new research and concepts, and some have encouraged new approaches to old topics.

Drafting the Manuscript

Before beginning to write, I have usually read or reread a style manual, such as Strunk and White's classic Elements of Style, Jacques Barzun's Simple and Direct, or William Zinnser's On Writing Well. Although I am often reminded that it is professors, not students, who choose textbooks, my imagined audience as I write is students. The ultimate purpose is not to impress peers, but to teach students. Besides, books that professors like, but students dislike, are destined for decline. So I try to write with a teacher's voice--one that is personal, playful, and provocative. The unseen student body that studies my introductory text may--I admit it--not learn about the place of ROC curves in signal detection theory, but I hope they will be better able to think critically when analyzing everyday experiences, to relate the concepts of psychology to some of the great ideas of other disciplines, and to assimilate the book's curious, questioning attitude.

But how can a psychologist who is not professionally trained in writing learn to write with crisp and colorful prose? Recognizing my own deficiencies, I retained a writing coach--a poet-essayist colleague known for his own playful use of language--who over the past six years has critiqued perhaps two thousand manuscript pages of my writing. When to this is added the detailed comments of a

highly competent editor, the reviews (on the current project) of some 15 to 20 professional colleagues per chapter, and the eventual sentence by sentence copy editing, I feel the support of a whole community of people striving to rescue me from confusion and error.

It's a lot of work. How much? I tallied some 3,550 hours from the moment McGraw-Hill first called to propose Social Psychology to its publication four years later (of which two years was spent writing and revising). But if teaching is important--if each of the persons sitting in our classes is important--then surely text writing and publishing is important, especially for those to whom undergraduate education is a high calling.

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